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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that sought to determine some of the causes to which undergraduate students attribute success or failure in music. Subjects were 43 music majors and 62 nonmusic majors enrolled in several sections of a beginning level guitar class. Subjects were administered the Asmus Music Attribution Orientation Scale (MAOS) and asked to indicate how important they thought each of the following attributions were in terms of contributing to their success or failure in music: (1) effort; (2) background; (3) classroom environment; (4) musical ability; and (5) affect for music. Results revealed that collectively the students placed more importance on the causal attributions of effort, affect for music, and musical ability. When divided by majors (music majors as opposed to nonmusic majors), the music majors placed more importance on effort, musical ability, and affect for music than did the nonmusic majors. Implications for teaching are discussed. The fact that many nonmajors performed as well or better than the music majors implies that teacher interventions aimed at modifying attributions and learning strategies may have positive effects on students. A skill mastery, rather than an ability oriented situation, might provide a context that is likely to foster long term use of learning strategies, developed around the belief that there is a contingent relationship between success and effort. Contains 25 references. (DK)

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Casual Attributions of Music Majors and Nonmusic Majors Regarding Success and Failure in Music: A Study of Motivation and Achievement

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Abstract

This study sought to determine some of the causes to which undergraduate students attribute success or failure in music. Subjects were forty-three music majors and sixty-two nonmusic majors enrolled in several sections of a beginning-level guitar class. Subjects were administered the Asmus Music Attribution Orientation Scale (MAOS) and asked to indicate how important they thought each of the following attributions were in terms of contributing to their success or failure in music: effort, background, classroom environment, musical ability and affect for music. Results revealed that collectively the students placed more importance on the causal attributions of effort, affect for music, and musical ability. When divided by majors (music majors vs nonmusic majors), the music majors placed more importance on effort, musical ability, and affect for music than did the nonmusic majors. Implications for teaching are discussed.

Introduction

Music educators have been and continue to be interested in factors which influence student motivation and achievement. In today's classrooms there tends be an inequality in student motivation. Some students strive and work for the sake of their own personal fulfillment, while others work because they are required to and do not believe that their actions are related to success and failure (Nicholls, 1979). In light of the fact that motivation has been cited as accounting for at least 25% of achievement (Caimi, 1981; Cattell, Barton & Dielman, 1972, Chandler, Chiarella & Auria, 1988), this motivational inequality merits attention. Research conducted in connection with Attribution Theory has helped to bring some understanding to this complex area.

One of the major tenets of Attribution Theory is that motivation and achievement are influenced by individual beliefs about the causes of their success or failure at given tasks (Weiner, 1972, 1972a, 1979). The four attributions commonly associated with this theory are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. The attributions of ability and effort are classified as internal and are assumed to originate from the student, while task difficulty and luck are considered to be external because they are perceived to be events happening outside of the individual's control. Attribution Theory also has a stability or time dimension which is considered to be either stable (not varying over repeated attempts at the same or similar tasks) or unstable (varying over repeated attempts). The causal attributions of ability and effort are considered to be internal-stable and internal-unstable respectively, while task difficulty is considered external-stable and luck, external-unstable.

Research has shown that the causes attributed to succeeding or failing at given tasks have a definite influence on student expectations for approaching future tasks (Weiner, 1972, 1979; Nicholls, 1976; Bar-Tal, 1978; Bardwell, 1984). That is, if students attribute the cause of their success to ability, they will expect to be successful in the future. Conversely, if students cite ability as a cause for being unsuccessful, they will expect to fail at future tasks. Should students attribute the cause of their success or failure to effort, they will be hopeful of changing future outcomes.

A considerable amount of attention has been given to effort as a causal attribution. Frieze and Snyder (1980) conducted research where first, third and fifth-grade students were interviewed to determine what they believed were probable causes for success or failure in several different situations. While attributions tended to differ across various situations, testing successes were largely attributed to effort.

Medway and Lowe (1980) asked 122 children participating in cross-age tutoring programs to cite causes believed to influence learning in a tutorial program. Whether attributions were measured prior to, during, or after tutoring, both tutors and tutees felt that tutorial learning was more dependent on effort than ability. Moreover, the tutees tended to attribute positive learning outcomes to their partners while attributing negative learning outcomes to themselves.

Deiner & Dweck (1978) addressed the cognitive and motivational differences of students classified as either helpless or mastery-oriented. Results revealed that those students classified as helpless had a tendency to attribute failure outcomes to perceived uncontrollable factors such as lack of ability. Those students classified as mastery-oriented made fewer attributions and engaged in self-monitoring and self-instruction, thereby focusing more on the development of remedies for certain problems.

In another study, Dweck (1975) sought to determine whether altering attributions for failure would enable children who tended to perceive themselves as helpless to deal more effectively with failure in a problem-solving situation. Twelve children divided into two groups were given one of two training sessions: one based on an attribution retraining program which exposed the children to several failure situations and emphasized effort as a causal attribution, and another which provided the children with only successful experiences, stressing no attributing causes. Results showed that subjects given the attribution retraining treatment maintained or improved their performance after failure, attributing the cause to effort or lack thereof. Subjects in the success only group, however, demonstrated a continual decline in performance following failure.

Ames & Archer (1988) studied the relationship of motivation to mastery and performance goals in an actual classroom setting. One hundred and seventy-six junior high and high school students were asked to respond to a questionnaire designed to determine their perceptions of the classroom goals. Students who perceived an emphasis on mastery goals in the classroom were reported as having, among other characteristics, a strong belief that success follows one's efforts. Students who perceived an emphasis on performance goals tended to focus more on ability, attributing failure to the lack of ability. Other researchers examining the effect of strategy as a causal attribution have found that strategy attributions generally lead to more constructive responses to failure than do

effort and ability attributions (Clifford, Kim, & McDonald, 1988; Anderson & Jennings, 1980).

In music education, Riemer (1975) investigated the influence of one's causal attributions for success on subsequent achievement behavior. One hundred and twenty-seven subjects participating in a piano practicum received instructions describing successful piano performance in terms of either ability, effort, task difficulty or luck. Findings revealed that subjects given instructions involving ability and effort reported more positive affect (i.e., greater satisfaction with their success at the piano) than those receiving instructions involving task difficulty and luck.

Asmus (1986) conducted a study with 143 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in music education or music therapy programs. Attribution Theory was applied to determine whether there was a relationship between the students' perceived causes of success and failure when talking about themselves and their perceived causes of success and failure when talking about others. Results showed that success or failure was attributed to task difficulty when students were talking about themselves and to effort when talking about others. In another study, Asmus (1985) examined the views of sixth-grade general music students to gain a better understanding of why students succeed and fail in music. Findings revealed that the majority of students selected the internal-stable attribution of ability and the internal-unstable attribution of effort as the major causes of their successes or failures in music. Asmus (1986a) expanded the previous study by adding junior or high school students, greatly increasing the sample size. Students were asked to give their free responses as to why some students are successful in music and others are unsuccessful. The major findings of the study were that 80% of the reasons cited had to do with effort and ability.

Chandler, Chiarella & Auria (1988) examined the motivations of 234 band members by asking them if they had ever challenged for a chair position, if they were happy with their current chair position, and what their performance level expectations were for the near future. Findings of the study showed that if students see themselves as musically successful, they will be encouraged to challenge more and attribute success to internal factors such as effort and musical ability. In failure situations causes were attributed to external reasons (e.g. task difficulty, luck, and current level of performance).

With the assistance of 105 instrumental music students, Austin and Vispoel (1992) investigated the effects of failure attribution feedback and classroom goal structure on motivational response and decision-making. Results showed that students attributed failure to the use of inappropriate strategies or insufficient efforts rather than the lack of ability. Austin (1991) has also conducted research which demonstrated that positive achievement outcomes and success-oriented behaviors can be encouraged if they are associated with a modifiable causal attribution such as effort.

Music education research using Attribution Theory has also found that students tend to change their causal attributions with grade level (Asmus, 1988; Austin, 1991). As the student advances in grade level, there is a gradual shift from internal-unstable attributions (effort) to internal-stable attributions (ability).

Questions for Examination

The purpose of the present student was to extend a previous investigation of motivation in relationship to Attribution Theory (Legette, 1992) to a different setting - a university beginning guitar class. The effects of causal attributions on student motivation and achievement were investigated. The following research questions were examined:

1. What causes do music majors and nonmusic majors attribute most to their success and failure in music?

2. Do differences in these perceived causes exist between music majors and nonmusic majors?

Procedures

Subjects were undergraduate students (N=105) enrolled in several sections of a beginning-level guitar class. The sample was comprised of 43 music majors and 62 nonmusic majors. Subjects were administered the Asmus (1988) Music Attribution Orientation Scale (MAOS) during one of their bi-weekly guitar lessons. The MAOS is comprised of 35 items divided into five different subscales (effort, background, classroom environment, musical ability and affect for music) with seven questions corresponding to each subscale. The students were asked to indicate how important they thought each item was on a scale of one to five with five being "extremely important" and one being "not important at all." Points for the items in each subscale were summed (35 being the maximum number of points obtainable) and averaged, creating a single score for each subscale. Asmus has determined the reliabilities for each subscale to be as follows: Effort (.824), Background (.770), Classroom Environment (.764), Musical Ability (.774), and Affect for Music (.690).

Results

The first research question was concerned with those causes which undergraduate music students attribute most to their success or failure in music. Descriptive statistics for all student responses by subscale are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for all Student Responses on the Music Attribution Orientation Scale.

Variable	M	SD
Effort	4.44	0.53
Background	2.86	0.76
Class Environment	3.60	0.64
Musical Ability	4.11	0.75
Affect for Music	4.14	0.59

As indicated by their responses, it appears that collectively, the students placed more importance on the causal attributions of effort, affect for music, and musical ability respectively.

The second research question sought to determine whether there were perceived differences in causal attributions between music majors and nonmusic majors. Descriptive statistics for student responses by major (i.e., music majors vs nonmusic majors) are provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Comparisons of Casual Attributions Between Music Majors and Nonmusic Majors

Music Majors (n=43)			Nonmusic Majors (n=62)		
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	t
Effort	4.60	0.40	4.33	0.58	2.66*
Background	2.96	0.81	2.79	0.72	1.15.
Class Environment	3.66	0.54	2.56	2.71	0.78
Musical Ability	4.42	0.60	3.89	0.77	3.74*
Affect for Music	4.36	0.49	4.00	0.62	3.17*

*p<.01

T-tests for two independent samples were used to analyze the data. Results revealed that the music majors placed slightly more importance on effort, musical ability and affect for music than the nonmusic majors placed on these attributions. This perceived difference was significant at the .01 level (p.01). No significant differences were found between majors for any of the other variables.

Discussion

In the present study, music majors and nonmusic majors, perceived effort, affect for music, and musical ability as being the most important causes contributing to their success or failure in music. This result appears to confirm Asmus' findings which show student beliefs about success and failure to be largely attributed to ability and effort. An implication which might be drawn from this finding is that there can be several motivational forces at work in one's classroom at a given time. Once these forces are known, music teachers may be able to structure their lessons accordingly. For some students, effort or persistence behaviors may need more reinforcement; for other students, behaviors related to ability may need to be encouraged. Some students may be motivated by feeling or affect for music; they have no desire to be successful performers, but are simply looking for a pleasurable musical experience.

When divided by majors (music majors vs nonmusic majors), music majors placed more importance on effort, musical ability, and affect for music than did the nonmusic majors. Since success is often attributed to effort and ability, this finding might lead one to conclude that music majors performed better in the guitar classes than the nonmusic majors. Student observations made by the researcher and supporting comments from other guitar instructors within the music education program tended to indicate the contrary. As a matter of fact, nonmusic majors often performed as well or better than music majors. A possible explanation for this occurrence might be that music majors, because of musical training and experiences which almost require them to be tenacious and competitive, have grown accustomed to attributing many of their successes or failures to ability and/or effort. Since any student could enroll in these classes without prior musical training of any kind, perhaps the music majors did not feel that a high degree of ability and effort was required. Conversely, nonmusic majors may have seen this particular situation as an opportunity to develop and master a new skill, as opposed to an opportunity to display their performance ability. This supposition corroborates Ames and Archer's (1988) research which showed students who perceived an emphasis on mastery goals in the classroom were reported as having a strong belief that success follows efforts. The implication drawn from this finding suggests that teacher interventions aimed at modifying attributions and learning strategies may have positive effects on students. A skill-mastery, rather than an ability-oriented situation, might provide a context which is likely to foster long term use of learning strategies, developed around the belief that there is a contingent relationship between success and effort.

Student motivation in music and its relationship to Attribution Theory continues to be a complex area in need of further research.

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